
THE ELIZABETHAN
SHAKESPEARE

*

J. DOVER WILSON

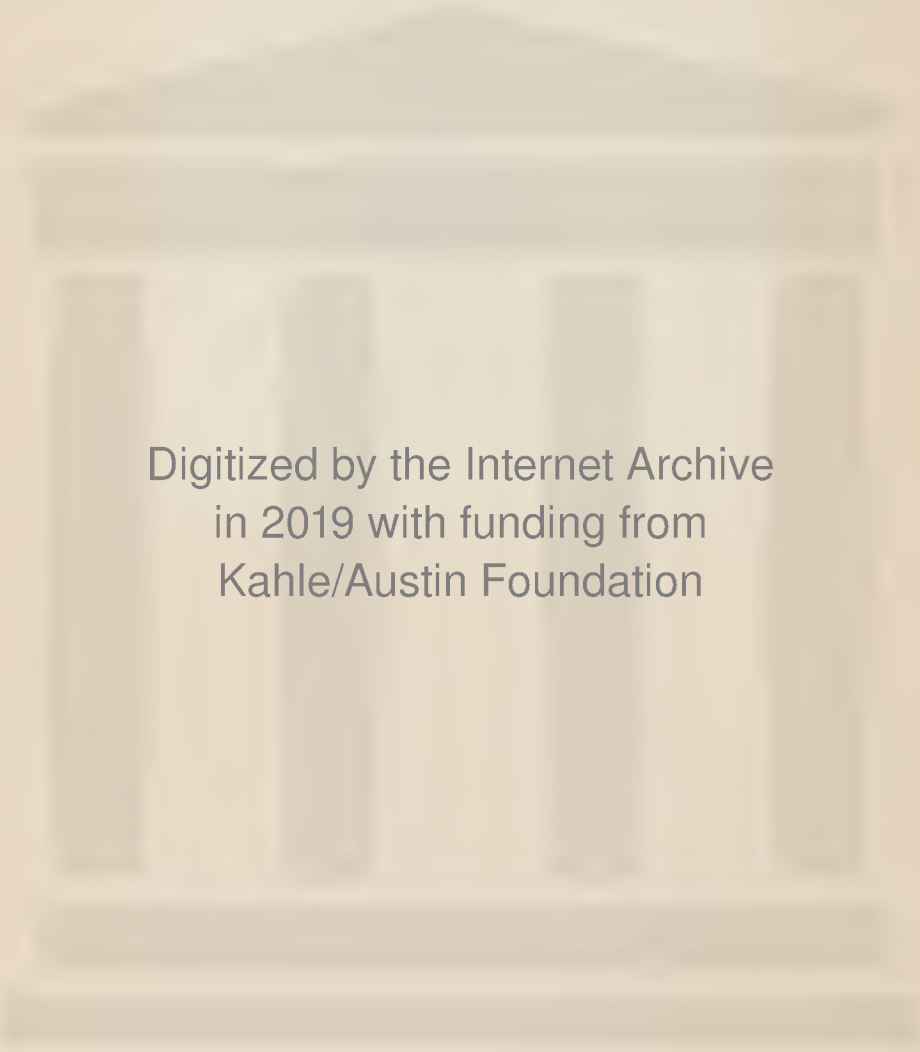
PR
2976
.W55

NUNC COGNOSCO EX PARTE



TRENT UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

JUN 25 1968



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2019 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

THE ELIZABETHAN SHAKESPEARE

by

J. DOVER WILSON

ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

of the

BRITISH ACADEMY

1929

FROM THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE
BRITISH ACADEMY. VOLUME XIV
LONDON : HUMPHREY MILFORD
AMEN HOUSE, E.C.

PR 2976 .W55

THE ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE
THE ELIZABETHAN SHAKESPEARE

By J. DOVER WILSON

Read May 1, 1929

BEN JONSON accused Shakespeare of lack of art and Samuel Johnson complained that 'he seems to write without any moral purpose'. In different language and with differences of emphasis both criticisms are being loudly repeated at the present day, and since the Poet-Laureate published in 1907 his essay on 'The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare's Drama',¹ an essay recently re-issued as the first number of his 'Collected Essays', much has been heard of the barbarous and brutal Elizabethans who thronged Shakespeare's theatre, and of the moral and artistic improprieties occasioned by the need of pleasing them. I propose this afternoon to say something under both these heads, and I shall begin by considering the first charge, that of lack of art.

No one at this time of day is going to defend Shakespeare as the perfect artist. He wrote many pedestrian and even some foolish lines, and taking the Folio as a whole Ben Jonson's wish that he had 'blotted a thousand' is probably just and reasonable. But the faults now complained of are not those of style or diction, still less that mixture of dramatic types which Jonson tilts at in his induction to *Bartholomew Fair*; they are faults of dramatic inconsistency, inadequate motivation, careless contradiction, faults of

¹ The Stratford Town edition of Shakespeare, vol. x. The essay is in a sense the development of a lecture by Professor Andrew Bradley delivered two years earlier on *Shakespeare's Theatre and Audience*, and this lecture, in turn, when printed in 1909 in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, contained a foot-note commenting upon Dr. Bridges's essay (pp. 366-7).

which Jonson seems to have been completely unconscious. Modern critics all over the world, scholars like Professor Schücking in Germany, Professor Stoll in America, and Mr. J. M. Robertson in this country, are busy going over the plays with their microscopes and bringing to light countless flaws of structure and character, flaws which they interpret as evidence either that Shakespeare was a crude or careless dramatist, or that he worked with indifferent collaborators. The latter explanation may pass muster in respect of plays like *Measure for Measure* or *All's Well that ends Well*, which are almost certainly the result of collaboration between Shakespeare and some second-rate dramatist to whom was entrusted the final shaping of the material. But collaboration of this kind is, I believe, rare in Shakespeare, and in any case it must be carefully distinguished from the far more frequent phenomenon of revision. The distinction has important aesthetic implications, since it is (or should be) a cardinal principle in the criticism of plays belonging to this period that the dramatist who last handles a text must accept full artistic responsibility for it. I make a point of this because those who detect, or think they detect, revision in the plays have on that account been accused before this Academy and elsewhere of disintegrating Shakespeare. I confess that I find this attitude a little difficult to understand. To show, for instance, that *Hamlet* had been rehandled once or even twice by Shakespeare is not surely to injure it in any way as a work of art. Nor, provided that one dramatist had the final revision in his complete control, is it reasonable to refuse the title of artistic unity to a play because it happens to be composed of strata written at different times or even by different hands. For, where Shakespeare rewrote he presumably imagined he was improving, and what he left alone he presumably thought good enough for his purposes.

Yes, but what exactly were his purposes? That is the crux, a crux which is the root of much confusion in present-day Shakespearian criticism. It can never be too often

emphasized that Shakespeare wrote his plays not for the printing-house but for the theatre, and that the texts he left behind him were not books but prompt-books or, if you will, theatrical scores for the performance of moving pageants of speech, action, and colour, upon a particular stage by a particular troupe of actors for a particular audience. It is doubtful whether any play of Shakespeare's was ever performed twice in his lifetime in exactly the same form. The widely different versions of plays like *Hamlet* and *King Lear* should have long ago warned the world of this fact. But what is palpable in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* is scarcely less obvious in every other text that has come down to us in two good playhouse forms, and may even be detected sometimes in plays of which no more than one text has survived. For example, had *A Midsummer Night's Dream* been preserved in the 1600 quarto alone, we could still feel tolerably certain that this play, originally written for one occasion, had been rehandled by Shakespeare for another and later one.¹ As it is, we have the Folio text as well to proclaim still further adaptation. For whereas in the quarto the interlude is set for a theatre with an inner-stage and a traverse which can be drawn to hide the bodies of Pyramus and Thisbe, in the Folio no traverse is available, so that the killing has to be enacted on the open stage, and is therefore perforce followed by Bottom's resurrection. Thus we must imagine Shakespearian playbooks in a constant state of flux, and if they come to rest when they pass out of the theatre into the printer's hands, their final state does not represent any considered preparation by the author for publication, but merely records the conditions of the last performance before the printing was taken in hand. In the modern world theatres exist to perform the plays of literary gentlemen called dramatists; in the Globe an actor made his living by

¹ The chief evidence for this rehandling is the disarrangement of eight passages in the first eighty-four lines of verse in act v, passages which may be omitted without injuring the sense of the context though certainly not without detracting from its beauty.

providing plays, new, retouched, or reconstructed, for the performances of a repertory company.

It follows that to criticize a play by Shakespeare in the same fashion and from the same point of view as we criticize a play by Mr. Bernard Shaw is as absurd as it would be to blame the polyphonic musicians of the sixteenth century for not observing the rules of harmony. It is not merely that the structure of the theatre has profoundly changed in the past three hundred years, the very meaning of the word 'play' has altered. With Shakespeare a play was first and foremost a performance; with us—at any rate since Mr. Shaw set the fashion of publishing drama—it has become first and foremost a printed book. But some of the critics I am considering go even farther; they actually take Shakespeare to task for ignoring the literary proprieties which we expect in a modern novel, biography, or history, quite oblivious of the fact that to bring forward loose ends and contradictions which can only be discovered by the close study of the printed texts and make them the basis of an aesthetic judgement on the plays as stage-productions is an entirely illegitimate proceeding, and withal a dangerous one likely to recoil upon the critic's own head. When, to take a famous instance, we read *Hamlet* the book, we may be puzzled to observe that the hero is apparently about eighteen years old at the beginning of the play and thirty years old at the end: but as we sit and watch *Hamlet* the play we are disturbed by no such discrepancy, for the simple reason that we have the hero before us in the shape of an actor made to look a certain age, which we accept of course entirely without question. Thus, though the discrepancy is there and, as evidence of textual revision, is interesting to scholars, it can in no way be regarded as a technical flaw in a drama which was written solely for performance and thought of by its creator from first to last in terms of the company which he served. Indeed, it is conceivable that the discrepancy arose merely from the fact that Burbadge, the impersonator of Hamlet, had grown older and stouter between the original

and the final draft of the play. In other words, the pointed reference in the grave-yard scene to the Prince of Denmark's thirty years may have been intended as a piece of 'fat' for the actor in two senses of the word.

Again, when Dr. Bridges writes 'The Tragedy of *Othello* is intolerably painful; and that not merely because we see *Othello* being grossly deceived, but because we are ourselves constrained to submit to palpable deception. The whole thing is impossible'¹, we must remember that he is speaking of a book, every nook and cranny of which has been explored and thrown into high relief by the relentless light of modern analytical criticism. In particular, he is looking at the book through the eyes of Professor Andrew Bradley, one of the greatest of Shakespeare's critics, yet at the same time apt to be misleading to readers who follow his penetrating curiosity into the very viscera of a tragedy and overlook his constant warning that these matters are often irrelevant as far as the theatre is concerned.² Indeed, this play which Dr. Bridges in his study finds 'impossible' is generally regarded on the stage as the most effective and technically the most perfect of all Shakespeare's tragedies. The two points of view are in startling opposition; and yet they are really complementary. For the swiftness and brilliance of *Othello* as a theatre-piece are, at least in part, brought about by those very contradictions and deceptions which would be rightly stamped as defects in a novel. The tempo of the play, for example, has been much praised. Its rapidity at once symbolizes, and heightens our sense of, the torrential

¹ *op. cit.* Collected Essays, I, p. 23.

² Dr. Bridges might have found *Othello* less intolerable had he pondered a sentence towards the end of the very note of Professor Bradley's upon which he founds his condemnation, a sentence which admits that no one 'either in the theatre or in a casual reading of the play' is likely to notice any of the impossibilities and contradictions that the writer has been discussing for the past six pages. (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 423-9). The proviso destroys the whole validity of Dr. Bridges's case. For, if they pass thus unnoticed in the theatre, such contradictions are of no dramatic significance whatsoever, however interesting they may prove in connexion with the history of the text.

passion that rages through the hero's mind; but this sense of speed has been purchased by just that foreshortening of time which, did Shakespeare allow us to consider it in the theatre as we are able to do in our studies, would be recognized as absurd. Or—to take a point of detail—critics who find Emilia guilty of 'gross stupidity'¹ or 'sinful levity'² for not confessing the theft of the kerchief to Desdemona, when Othello taxes her with its loss in her presence, are surely themselves displaying some stupidity of dramatic perception.³ Shakespeare sees to it that Emilia shall be there when Othello cross-examines Desdemona about the kerchief, in order to heighten the feeling of tension, to keep his audience upon the rack of what Professor Bradley has called 'sicken-ing hope', which it is one of his chief purposes in this play to evoke. But if we watch the scene upon the stage, there is (or should be) nothing in the least flat or obtuse in the conduct of Emilia. She does not confess the theft, partly of course because it was a theft, but partly also because she is a woman, a woman married to an over-jealous husband, and therefore amused to see her young mistress getting a taste of what she considers the ordinary run of married life. It never occurs to her to connect Othello's jealousy with Iago's desire for the kerchief. Why should it? Her mind is busy not with handkerchiefs but with husbands:—

Desdemona. Alas the day! I never gave him cause.

Emilia. But jealous souls will not be answered so:
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.⁴

¹ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 240.

² Schlegel quoted in Furness's *Variorum Othello*, p. 432.

³ Dr. Bridges writes: 'Exasperation is the word that I should choose to express the state of feeling which the reading of the *Othello* induces in me: and seeing how cleverly everything is calculated to this effect, I conclude that it was Shakespeare's intention, and that what so hurts me was only a pleasurable excitement to his audience, whose gratification was relied on to lull their criticism. What else can be the meaning of Emilia purloining the kerchief, and then being present at the enquiry concerning it?'

⁴ Act. III, scene iv, 158–61.

Any actress would make it clear if she were worth her salt, since the signposts in the text are plain enough.¹

Verisimilitude, not exactitude or consistency, is required of dramatists and novelists; for they are artists, not historians. They may fool their public to the top of its bent, on one condition—that the deception is completely successful. But the two arts are different, and means which are available in one are denied to the other. The freedom of the novelist is in many ways far greater than that of the dramatist. As regards consistency, however, he is more restricted: his readers can pause, ponder, and even turn back to check him. In the theatre, on the other hand, especially in Shakespeare's theatre without drop-curtain or act-pauses, the play moves forward from beginning to end and gives the audience no opportunity of examining the coherence of events too curiously. From the very outset of his career Shakespeare took advantage of this freedom, but as time went on and as his sense of mastery of his instrument, the Elizabethan stage, grew upon him, he availed himself of it, I think, more and more boldly—not because he was becoming careless, but quite legitimately in the service of his art, in order to heighten his effects and to increase the volume and complexity of his theatrical orchestration. Vasari writes of Titian:

'His first works were finished with great diligence, and might be looked at near or far, but the last were worked with great patches of colour, so that they cannot be seen near, but at a distance they look perfect. This is the reason that many think they are done without any trouble, but this is not true. And this way of working is most judicious, for it makes the pictures seem living.'²

Shakespeare's works must also be looked at and heard 'at a distance', the distance which the theatre provides, if they

¹ For the most thoroughgoing treatment of the so-called defects and inconsistencies of this play the reader may be referred to *Othello: an Historical and Comparative Study*, by Elmer Edgar Stoll: Studies in Language and Literature, University of Minnesota, 1915.

² Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters*.

are to be justly appreciated; 'seen near' in the book they may lose their whole perspective.

Nevertheless, despite the blind eye which they turn towards the theatrical conditions of Shakespeare's art, the modern school of Shakespearian critical analysis is doing work which carries us some way towards an understanding, not of Macbeth, Iago, Cleopatra, and Hamlet, but of the craftsmanship which went to the creation of these characters, and deliberately concealed or blurred their motives so as to render them more convincingly human upon the stage. Such analysis is nothing to Shakespeare's purpose; it does not add a whit to our enjoyment or appreciation of the plays themselves. On the contrary, by its exposure of tricks and deceptions, loose threads and gaping flats, inconsistencies and vaguenesses, in a word of the whole seamy side of the dramatist's production, a side he never intended us to see at all, it appears to 'sully all his gloss of former honour' and leave his dramas 'things of shreds and patches'. It appears so, but only to the dull-witted and the faint-hearted. For what it means is that even Shakespeare, at long last, is being brought to the judgement-bar of criticism, must submit like every other poet and artist to the dissecting-table and the scalpel, and will in the end be forced to yield up to our scrutiny the very heart of his mystery. 'Others abide our question; thou art free!' It is no longer true.

But the end is not yet; and before the end is in sight the present generation of critics must themselves submit to judgement—the judgement of the theatre. It is not enough to be a scholar, a poet, or even a modern dramatist to pass verdict upon the craft of Shakespeare. True, there is still much to do in the field of scholarship. Despite the work of men like Mr. W. J. Lawrence, Sir Edmund Chambers, and many others, we are not yet sure about the details of the Elizabethan stage, and until we have mastered the stops of Shakespeare's recorder we cannot hope to command it 'to any utterance of harmony'. As to the original texts, it was only the other day that Professor Pollard discovered their

real significance for us, and it will take another decade of labour by as many students as may be pressed into the field before we can expect even to spell them out to our satisfaction. Then too, there is the whole vast continent, mostly unexplored so far, of the Elizabethan mind, the mind of Shakespeare's audience and of Shakespeare himself, with its alchemical and astrological prepossessions, its demonology and its ghost-lore, its barbarous medicine and its bizarre psychology, to say nothing of its political and topical interests. How much light may be shed upon the plays by a week-to-week account of London gossip while they were being written is being amply demonstrated by Mr. G. B. Harrison.¹ Unless I am very much mistaken, he will succeed in disposing for ever of the myth of the impersonality of Shakespeare's art. He has already discovered an unmistakable contemporary original for the Bastard in *King John*, and as he continues to unroll his film before our eyes we may expect to catch likenesses to other familiar Shakespearian figures. How far astray, on the other hand, scholars may wander in their aesthetic judgement through ignorance of the elements of Elizabethan spiritualism may be shown by recent pronouncements on the ghost-scenes in *Hamlet*.² For example, three of the historical critics already mentioned, Professor Schücking, Professor Stoll, and Mr. J. M. Robertson, unite in fastening upon that old crux, Hamlet's reference to

The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns,

as an illustration of Shakespeare's carelessness, since, they assert, such words are absurd on the lips of one who has himself interviewed the returned spirit of his own father. A little knowledge of Elizabethan ghost-lore would have

¹ v. *An Elizabethan Journal, being a record of those things most talked of during the years 1591-1594*, by G. B. Harrison (Constable, 1928)—a volume shortly to be followed, it is hoped, by further instalments.

² v. Introduction to Lewis Lavater's *Of Ghostes and Spirites*, Shakespeare Association, 1929.

shown them that the passage in question is simply an expression of the contemporary Protestant refusal to believe that apparitions could be the spirits of the departed, and that it falls in with the despondent mood of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy as the most positive utterance of the doubt which haunts the student of Wittenberg until the end of the play-scene and which he voices plainly enough in the preceding soliloquy when he surmises that 'the ghost that I have seen may be a devil'. Further, since the universe of man is the creation of human thought and human imagination, Shakespeare quite literally lived in a different universe from ourselves. We inhabit a house founded by Copernicus and roofed in by Newton; and we are about to quit it for another designed by Einstein. We are told that the new building can only be described in mathematical formulae, or that it is unimaginable. It may be so for us, but it will certainly not be so for our grandchildren. Language will adjust itself to the new conceptions, and babies will grow up understanding the Einsteinian cosmos because they will assume it from the start. But what is happening in our own day teaches us to appreciate the gulf that divides us from Shakespeare. He would find our universe as unimaginable and inexpressible as we find Einstein's. His very language is Ptolemaic.¹

Yet when learning has solved these and a hundred kindred problems, when the last ounce of meaning has been extracted from the last word of the text, and when the poetic critic has joined the commentator and laid bare the secrets of Shakespeare's diction, the nervous system of his verse and the complete history of his stylistic development, the serious study of his dramatic intentions and effects may still remain untouched. For such study is to be undertaken,

¹ Physiological notions have likewise completely altered. 'A plague of sighing and grief! it blows a man up like a bladder' exclaims Falstaff (*1 Henry IV*, II. iv. 365), and we laugh, without noticing that half the jest has died with the death of the doctrine, frequently referred to by Shakespeare, that 'sighing and grief' impoverished the blood and so led to emaciation.

not by solitary men poring upon books in their libraries, but by scholar-players in the traffic of a Shakespearian theatre. This living criticism of a living art might be inaugurated to-morrow if we had the courage and the faith to furnish the means. The adventure does not lack its leader. An actor-dramatist of our day, himself a profound Elizabethan scholar, has set himself, like Jacob with the angel, to wrestle lovingly with his fellow actor-dramatist of three hundred years ago, in the hope of forcing him to reveal his secret. I need not tell you that I am speaking of Mr. Granville-Barker. Nor do I need to remind you of those brilliant *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, essays towards the new critical method, in which he has sketched out his ideas on the staging of certain plays. To me, as doubtless to many others here, the preface to *King Lear* in particular came like a fresh revelation. Here is a tragedy labelled by the literary critics from Charles Lamb onwards as too vague and too terrible for the stage and now shown by a man of the theatre to be full of situations and dramatic values which pass unnoticed by the reader, because they are only given being in the visible movement and interplay of flesh and blood. Even that ancient stone of stumbling, the blinding of Gloucester, finds its due and fitting place as an inevitable buttress in the mighty structure. A strange paradox, is it not, that we who with Dr. Bridges class this as one of the 'scenes which offend our feelings, so that we cannot endure to see them in representation' never give ourselves the opportunity of putting those feelings to the test? And thus Shakespeare is condemned, unheard, unseen.

Mr. Granville-Barker should be allowed to prove his case, to demonstrate by stage-production the superiority of the Elizabethan *King Lear*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, to the dramatic poem which at once astonished and pained Victorian readers. But lacking both theatre and an established company to experiment with, he is obliged to fall back on the pen and the lecturer's desk, and we remain in ignorance of Shakespeare's art, and are for the

most part content to remain so. Still, something can be done even by lectures and prefaces. You will not easily forget, I think, the discourse delivered before you in 1925. Let me pick out a passage particularly relevant to my present theme.

'I do not pretend,' he said, 'that I have fathomed Shakespeare's secret; my contention is indeed that it has not been fathomed yet, and that it cannot be given to the world by such means as we have at hand. The scholar, at best, will be in the case of a man reading the score of a symphony, humming the themes. He may study and re-study a play, and ever find something new. . . .' Yet, 'who will not confess with me that at any performance some quite unsuspected effect (unsuspected often by the interpreters themselves) may suddenly glow into life before him?'¹

'A man reading the score of a symphony, humming the themes!' If Mr. Granville-Barker with all his theatrical experience and his incomparable theatrical sense thinks of himself in such terms as he ponders over Shakespeare at his desk, how parlous must be the condition of us literary interpreters, with no practical knowledge of the stage and too often unconscious that the stage has any bearing at all upon the problems we discuss. When the New Globe is built—it is bound to come—and the King's Men—King Shakespeare's this time, not King James's—get to work, their purpose will be of course to perform the plays as they ought to be performed. But first they will study much and experiment often, because no one yet knows how Shakespeare 'ought to be performed'. Their primary task, in short, will be the discovery of Shakespeare's technique. Now in the course of this discovery they will also be led to consider those contradictions, inconsistencies, and loose ends, which modern criticism is so busy with. It is my belief that they will not only find most of them disappearing in the true stage-perspective, but even that a large proportion, as I have suggested already, so far from being defects, were deliberately employed by the master-

¹ *From Henry V to Hamlet*, by Harley Granville-Barker, p. 28.

craftsman as means of dramatic grace. In this connexion it may occur perhaps to some antiquarian among them—the librarian of the theatre, shall we say?—that writers on Shakespeare during the first quarter of the twentieth century were much occupied with matters of this kind. If he turns us up, how much will he find of our theorizing and discussion that is relevant to the purpose of his company? How many halfpence worth of daily bread for the player to this intolerable deal of literary sack, of German, American, and English vintage, which has so blown up the Shakespeare of our day that he appears to be bursting at the seams? Truly a judgement awaits the present generation of those who sit in judgement on the Man of the Theatre—the judgement of the theatre itself. It is a chastening reflection, which sometimes troubles me in the watches of the night!

Even now, on our picture stage and in our commercialized playhouse, we may occasionally be lucky enough to check or correct the deductions of the academic theorist, if we observe performances of Shakespeare closely. And sometimes a blunder on the part of the producer will actually expose a bookman's fallacy. I have come across at least one amusing instance of this, which may be quoted as a 'cautionary tale'. Mr. Granville-Barker is scathing on the subject of Shakespeare in modern dress, but for my own poor part I found Sir Barry Jackson's *Hamlet* at the Kingsway a few years ago so instructive on the play I happen to know best that I went four times and learnt more on each successive occasion. The Birmingham Repertory Company possess one shining virtue which most other modern companies lack. They play as a team, and the quality of the acting is not proportioned to the size of the part. Moreover, Mr. Poel has taught them that the traditional act-pauses are devoid of Shakespearian authority and may be treated with a high hand. But the modern dinner-hour cannot, alas, be so treated by any manager with the smallest regard for his box-office, so that the *Hamlet* was cut,

in places pretty drastically. One of the scenes thus sacrificed was that at the beginning of Act II in which Polonius dispatches his man Reynaldo to Paris with instructions to spy upon Laertes. It is not a complete scene, since, as you will recollect, Ophelia's account of Hamlet's invasion of her closet follows immediately; but it is readily excised and its riddance saves seventy-two lines. Moreover, in making this cut the Birmingham players were well in line with the latest findings of Shakespearian scholarship, inasmuch as Mr. J. M. Robertson has classed the episode among 'superfluous' and 'irrelevant scenes' and declared that it 'clearly derives somehow from a pre-Shakespearian source'. Indeed he continues, 'as our play now stands, the only conceivable motive for the Reynaldo scene is the theatrical need for comic relief after the tremendous Ghost scene'.¹ Yet by following Mr. Robertson, Sir Barry Jackson's producer succeeded quite unwittingly in confuting him and entirely vindicating Shakespeare. For omit the Reynaldo episode in the theatre, and it is seen to be absolutely vital to the whole structure of the play. The effect at the Kingsway was that Hamlet rushed straight from the interview with his father's spirit to the interview with Ophelia; and her description of him,

Pale as his shirt ; his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been looséd out of hell
To speak of horrors,

only confirmed the impression. Thus Hamlet's behaviour to Ophelia at this juncture was provided with an excuse for which there is no warrant in Shakespeare, the two months' interval vanished into air, and the sense of delay was weakened to such an extent that it was difficult to understand what Hamlet's self-reproaches concerning his procrastination were about. My friend Mr. Robertson will, I hope, forgive me for employing a slip on his part to illustrate the general thesis that we literary critics run great

¹ J. M. Robertson, *The Problem of Hamlet*, 1919, pp. 57-8.

risks in passing judgements on Shakespeare which involve questions of theatrical values. I fear I have myself made many slips as bad or worse; and though I shall continue to live dangerously, I cling, like a shipwrecked sailor on a raft, to memories of experience as a producer of amateur Shakespearian performances, and strive to keep those memories green by as frequent visits to theatres playing Shakespeare as a busy man can find time for. And however wooden the company or slipshod the production, I never come away without fresh light, new hints.

Yet the theatre, even the ideal theatre of our dreams, cannot claim a monopoly of Shakespeare. He has passed beyond the charmed circle of the art he served, and those disgracefully printed little quartos of his plays which he himself took no interest in and probably utterly despised have proved the first-fruits of a line of printed texts which, as far as eye can see, will stretch out till the crack o' doom. And so the reader has his rights in Shakespeare as well as the actor and the spectator, rights too which must be respected. It has been the burden of this lecture that these rights, at any rate since the time of Coleridge, have been overmuch respected, to the contempt of Shakespeare's craft and the misapprehension of his purposes. But 'the whirligig of time brings in his revenges', and there are signs in some quarters of an arrogance which, if it got its own way, would imprison the man of the theatre within the walls of the theatre and deny the laity access to the sacred text except as interpreted by the ministration of the stage. At all such talk of hierophantic exclusiveness an editor can afford to smile, for his function is to make Shakespeare available to readers, and he knows that readers will always outnumber spectators by more than ten to one. But he cannot afford to quarrel with the theatre, for he knows too that once cut the connexion there and the springs of his truest inspiration are dried up. Most of all does he need the freshening influence of the living art of the playhouse in the most thankless, the most dangerous, the almost impossible part of his task, the

framing of stage-directions. Editorial stage-directions will always evoke the laughter of the actor and will never completely satisfy the judgement of the scholar. Yet no editor can avoid the responsibility; he must either compose them himself or endorse those of his predecessors by reproducing them. Stage-directions of some kind are essential if a dramatic text is to be intelligible, while to make it easy to read, as Mr. Shaw has demonstrated, some degree of elaboration is required. And of all the reader's rights in Shakespeare, the greatest, after that of being presented with a true text, is the right of easy access.

After nine years of mining operations in the text of Shakespeare it is a relief to an editorial 'pionier' to emerge from the cellarage for an afternoon and exercise his lungs—'lungs faintly powdered with coal-dust' as one critic has been good enough to describe them—by blowing his horn a little on the battlements. But Dr. Jekyll the editor has now had his outing, and it is time for Mr. Hyde the professor of pedagogy to take up the tale. I might have suppressed him altogether, were it not that with an ex-president of the Board of Education in the chair he refused to keep silence and were it not too that he claimed to be specially briefed in respect of the second of the two charges against Shakespeare I am asking you to consider. Certainly there can be no doubt that in the essay already referred to, the Poet-Laureate was primarily addressing those whose business lies with the care and instruction of the young, and that, profoundly as he reverences Shakespeare, he is gravely concerned at the prospect of his plays becoming the basis of our national English culture, as they inevitably must become with the growing neglect of the Bible at home and the Classics at school. For though his pamphlet is mostly taken up with dramatic points similar to those above discussed, they are only brought forward as illustrations of his main thesis, that the influence of the barbarous Elizabethan audience led Shakespeare to deface his plays not merely by flaws of character and construction but also by moral

improprieties which are offensive to modern taste and contaminating to youthful minds. And the purpose with which he set out is made clear in the 'practical corollary' with which he concludes, namely

'that Shakespeare should not be put into the hands of the young without the warning that the foolish things in his plays were written to please the foolish, the filthy for the filthy, and the brutal for the brutal; and that, if out of veneration for his genius we are led to admire or even tolerate such things, we may be thereby not conforming ourselves to him, but only degrading ourselves to the level of his audience, and learning contamination from those wretched beings who can never be forgiven their share in preventing the greatest poet and dramatist of the world from being the best artist'.

Here is a challenge indeed! Here is matter, and to spare, for a dozen lectures! More than half-way through one I have only time to take up a single issue, an issue closely allied with that theme which has hitherto occupied us this afternoon, and also, as we shall discover, not unrelated to education.

Let me broach it with a question. What kind of a Shakespeare is this that Dr. Bridges asks us to commend to the young? Phrases like 'veneration for his genius', 'conforming ourselves to him', 'the greatest poet and dramatist of the world' are hints enough that he subscribes without question to what may be called the Victorian conception of Shakespeare. And in this matter we are most of us still Victorian. When we think of Shakespeare, we tend to think of him in the last two acts of his career—acts in which, as Mr. Lytton Strachey has reminded us, we have carefully suppressed certain scenes which mar the symmetry of the picture. We think of him in the period of *Lear*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest* as a great tragic poet, facing the vastity of the universe, wrestling with the problems of evil and disaster—a man of brooding temper, of lofty thought, of grave demeanour, and, after passing through the fire, of joyful serenity of temper. In a word, we think of him as a kind of Prospero, swaying a whole world of imagination by the aid

of his attendant genius, and banishing all the Caliban elements of human nature to a rockbound dungeon beneath his cell. It is a pretty notion; but it minimizes the greatness of his achievement, ignores the miracle of his development, and in paying him semi-divine honours does him grievous wrong as a man. Dr. Johnson said of Isaac Watts: 'For children he condescended to lay aside the scholar, the philosopher, and the wit, to write little poems of devotion and systems of instruction adapted to their wants and capacities.' The Victorian Shakespeare also condescends to lay aside the philosopher, but not for the purposes of devotion and instruction. No: he stoops from the heights of his serene omniscience to tickle the palate of a degraded audience, to pander to the taste of Caliban himself with dish after dish made savoury with the spice of 'the foolish, the filthy, and the brutal'. And if we ask why, the answer must be, to get his living, to make money, to purchase New Place, a coat of arms and other trappings of gentility, since if we are to believe Sidney Lee—'his literary attainments and successes were chiefly valued as serving the prosaic end of making a permanent provision for himself and his daughters'.¹

Now if this be a true account of the author of the plays, then I for one am frankly a Baconian. For the eyes that peep through the mask of this fawning philosopher and Olympian cynic can surely be no other than those of the sagest and most cold-hearted of Lord Chancellors. But it is not true. I deny it, not because I do not wish it to be true, or because I shudder to think of the young 'conforming themselves' to such an ideal, but simply because it does not fit the facts. Or rather it represents a hybrid monster begotten of an honest though ill-considered attempt to reconcile the Victorian conception of Shakespeare with certain facts which the Victorians overlooked or found it convenient to ignore. Modern criticism, from Coleridge to Dr. Andrew Bradley, has been mainly occupied with the tragedies; the

¹ Sidney Lee, *Life of Shakespeare*, p. 503.

comedies have been comparatively neglected; and in consequence, as I have said, we have tended to look at Shakespeare through the tragic end of the biographical telescope. But the comedies came first; the Shakespeare of *King Lear* and *The Tempest* grew out of the Shakespeare who gave us Berowne and the Bastard, Juliet's Nurse and Mistress Quickly, the clowns Lance and Lancelot, Sir Toby Belch and Sir John Falstaff, to name only a few of the greatest rout of unseemly disreputables that ever teemed from a dramatist's brain. Were these characters created merely 'to please the foolish, the filthy, and the brutal?' The question answers itself. They are immortal, because of their amazing vitality; and their vitality is an indisputable testimony to the enormous satisfaction that went to their making. To attack the 'wretched' Elizabethans for degrading Shakespeare is to attack the Elizabethan Shakespeare for not living up to Victorian standards. And when I say 'the Elizabethan Shakespeare' I am now speaking by the history-book; the Jacobean Shakespeare became not more respectable but more serious.

During the quarter of an hour or so that remains, will you allow me to stress one or two well-known facts about this Elizabethan Shakespeare which have, I think, been too little regarded? He steps into the limelight of history with a flattering, not to say deferential, testimonial from a fellow-writer and fellow-dramatist. The dying Greene had attacked him in the famous passage on 'the upstart crow', and Henry Chettle, who edited the pamphlet containing this passage, felt himself bound, in a book published a few months later, to offer a public apology. 'I am as sorry', he writes, 'as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his demeanour no less civil than he excellent in the quality he professes, besides divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing that approves his art.' The words were printed in December 1592, and they prove not only that Shakespeare was already

recognized as 'honest and of an open and free nature', to quote another testimonial found among Ben Jonson's papers after his death forty-five years later,¹ but that he had also made a name in influential circles as a writer of comedy. Indeed 'facetious grace' most happily describes those qualities in Shakespeare's early plays which would especially appeal to the cultured men of high rank, who, as Chettle hints, were interesting themselves in the rising dramatist's fortunes. We have not, I think, allowed sufficiently for the presence of such men in Shakespeare's audience. Certainly he wrote with his eye particularly upon them, for as he tells us in *Hamlet*, in his opinion their 'censure' must 'o'erweigh a whole theatre of others'. Nor is it difficult to guess from the fare which he provided that these noble patrons were young. Play after play at this period contains its party of dashing young bucks. They are come abroad to see the great world in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. They seek to combine this with university studies in the last named, or they found a little 'academe' of their own in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Or yet again, as in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado about Nothing*, they are just men of the town or gentlemen about the court, revelling and roistering and chaffing each other. Almost always too, like young men of whatever rank or whatever period, they hunt in threes. Mercutio, Romeo, and Benvolio; Berowne, Longaville, and Dumain; Antonio, Bassanio, and Gratiano; Petruchio, Lucentio, and Tranio—so persistent is the triangle that it is hard to resist a suspicion that the same triangle existed among the 'divers of worship' for whose eyes the dramas were primarily written.

On the other hand, such groupings are highly convenient dramatically, since they provide dialogue, and I need not remind you how large a proportion of the dialogue in Shakespearian comedy is taken up with young-mannish

¹ The striking similarity between Chettle's tribute and Jonson's is noted by Dr. A. E. Bradley, v. *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, p. 317.

conversation. These students, courtiers, or inns-of-court men—always thoroughly English and of London, whatever be the name of the Italian city to which they ostensibly belong—chat together, or with their servants, worrying the language and getting entangled in it, like puppies with a ball of string. They quibble and jest, endlessly and untiringly, while their jesting, after the manner of undergraduates, is frank and unseemly. They skirt philosophy, write poems and read them aloud, and above all discuss love, discuss it lightly, sometimes cynically, often indecorously. For the atmosphere is essentially a bachelor one, and the general attitude towards the great enemy of that state is best expressed in the words of the serving-man in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: 'Though the chameleon Love can feed on air, I am one that is nourished by my victuals and would fain have meat' (II. i. 178). As a precipitate for this atmosphere, and as whetstones for these blades, Shakespeare introduces his 'mocking wenches'—a type which he invented and reproduced with variations in one play after another. And there can be no doubt that his 'facetious grace' appeared most brilliant to his contemporaries in the 'sets of wit well played' between the young bachelors and these sprightly women-folk. *Love's Labour's Lost* is richest in this dialogue, is indeed little more than a succession of such 'sets of wit'; but it is to be found, of course, in many other plays. Petruchio and Katherine, for instance, carry on an elaborate duel of the kind at their first encounter, while with Benedick and Beatrice the steel is at the brightest and the thrust and parry at the swiftest. Skirmishes of this sort are more exciting than mere 'volleys of words' shot off by the men among themselves, since the element of sex gives a sense of danger to the fencing; the buttons are off the foils, a slip and one or other may be wounded—to the heart. It pleased Shakespeare to underline this peril, so to speak, by steeping his dialogue in *double entendre*. The conversation is not coarse, as it often is between the men, but it is frequently highly indelicate, though

the equivocal sense is generally so obscure as to escape the casual modern reader entirely, and must sometimes also have escaped all but the keenest witted amongst the judicious in the original audience.

And as with the early comedies, so in a slightly different way with the poems, which also belong to this period. *Venus and Adonis*, which was authorized for publication, remarkably enough, 'under the hands of the Archbishop of Canterbury', was clearly aimed at the young, and the six editions of it that appeared between 1592 and 1602 show that it hit its mark. 'Affluent in beautiful imagery and metrical sweetness,' writes the standard biographer of Shakespeare, 'it is imbued with a juvenile tone of licence, which harmonizes with its pretension of youthful origin'.¹ The theme of *Lucrece* is graver and the treatment more mature, while one or two of the *Sonnets* express some of Shakespeare's deepest thoughts on life; but the general tone of all these poems is the same as that of *Venus and Adonis*; they were written in the same mood and addressed to the same public.

The Elizabethan Shakespeare was, then, not an Olympian pandering to a barbarous audience; he was a light-hearted dramatic poet in his early thirties who succeeded in securing what all poets of that age strove to secure, namely the admiring patronage of a powerful circle of cultivated noblemen at Court. For them he wrote his poems, and chiefly for them too, as I believe, he wrote his comedies and histories. And though he wrote to please, he did so to please himself quite as much as his patrons, for he admired them as much as they admired him. Their tastes were his own, and the mutual admiration sprang from 'the marriage of true minds'.

What then—to return to the Poet-Laureate's corollary—are we to say about Shakespeare when we place his works in the hands of the young? I am not thinking, and I do not suppose Dr. Bridges was thinking, of children, who read

¹ Sidney Lee, *Life of Shakespeare*, p. 143.

their selected plays in school editions and ask no questions about the author. I have in mind boys and girls in upper sixth forms at school, or of college age, of the age of Southampton when Shakespeare wrote *Venus and Adonis* for his delight. Well, if we elders are to say anything at all, let us at least tell the truth and the whole truth. We must make it clear, for a beginning, that poetic and dramatic genius has no necessary connexion with moral propriety at all, and that Shakespeare right up to the end of his life was never a very decorous person. But we must explain, on the other hand, that moral sanity and moral propriety are two utterly different things and that few men have ever lived possessing more moral sanity than Shakespeare. Thus he whose laugh is 'broad as ten thousand beeves at pasture' spreads no contamination, and though, to quote Dr. Johnson once again, 'so much more ready to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose,' has yet become one of the greatest moral forces of the world.

And if the young people protest that this paradox is too hard for them, let Shakespeare be allowed to speak for himself. Let him speak through the play which above all others belongs to the young, his *Romeo and Juliet*. Written at the height of his Elizabethan gaiety, this tragic tale of star-crossed lovers is shot with comic colour and rich in comic characters, among whom Mercutio and the Nurse stand out pre-eminent. By what right have these reprobates thrust themselves into so tender, so sublime a drama of young love? The answer is that they are the two pillars which support the whole dramatic structure. For the lovers, in the great scenes where they are together, scenes more like opera than drama, chant their passion to each other in immortal verse but tell us little about themselves. Yet somehow Shakespeare must convince us of their reality, must assure us that they are creatures of flesh and blood. He does so by placing characters of the utmost vivacity at their side—the Nurse beside Juliet and Mercutio beside Romeo. Furthermore, both Mercutio and the Nurse are coarse and harp upon the

physical basis of love. He is full of the bawdy talk that full-blooded young men affect; and she prattles after the manner of old peasant women. Is not Shakespeare stooping to tickle the palate of 'those wretched beings' his audience? Are not such passages just 'sallets to make the matter savoury,'¹ outrageous excrescences upon the greatest of modern love-poems? On the contrary, they are as essential to the tone of the play as the characters which speak them are to the play's structure. Once again the magician is assuring us of reality. He is proving that the marvellous blossom of love which forms the main theme of the story is not a mere poet's dream, a pleasing fancy, but a piece of real life rooted deep in the crude common soil of human nature, the nature we all know so well, too well. He is persuading young readers or spectators, boys and girls of all types, that the passion of Mercutio's bosom friend for a mistress suckled at the Nurse's breast is a passion possible for themselves; and by making such splendour seem possible he is adding meaning and sanctification to their own little loves. It is just because Shakespeare conceals nothing and condemns nothing—because he is so utterly unlike a school-master or a preacher or a professor—that the young feel safe with him. And having gained their confidence he may lead them where he will, to endure the purging fires of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, to share the crucifixion and redemption of *Lear*, to win through to the haven of atonement and forgiveness in the enchanted island.

For as the virility of Mercutio helps us to accept the raptures of Romeo, so the Elizabethan Shakespeare gives guarantee for the Jacobean. The passage from Falstaff to Hamlet, from *Venus and Adonis* to *King Lear*, is a passage from one world to another; yet we are with the same

¹ Dr. Bridges takes these words of Hamlet as 'a confession' by Shakespeare 'that he had himself deliberately played false to his own artistic ideals for the sake of gratifying his audience'. Until we know a good deal more about the Aeneas speech than we are ever likely to know it is surely risky, to say the least of it, to found arguments upon it.

Shakespeare in both. He has grown—grown out of all knowledge, as the saying is—but he has not recanted or denied one whit of his former self. And so we trust him as we trust no other writer. For he has proved himself one of us, has shown that however foolish or brutal or filthy we may be, he understands us and claims us as his brothers. Thus too, when he confronts us with the deepest and gravest problems of life and death, we know that he will deal fairly, neither beguiling our eyes with false hopes nor blinding them with the mists of despair. But on May Day, the festival of youth and fecundity, I would not leave you thinking of the grappler with problems, or even of the healer and reconciler. Rather I would remind you once more of that teeming comic imagination, that inexhaustible spring of geniality and fun, that prodigality of enchanting word-music, that tender and humorous observance of human frailty, that irresistible gusto and delight in every manifestation of life, which go to make up what I have called the Elizabethan Shakespeare. I have dwelt at some length on one aspect of his work because it seemed to me that the time had come to be honest about it. But that is only a small element of the whole, an occasional eddy as it were on the racing leaping torrent of virility which beats like a tide of pulsing blood through the great comedies. To give a picture of the complete Shakespeare at this period of his development would be impossible. I have essayed a hint or two, nothing more. Let me borrow another from himself and end with that piece of unconscious self-portraiture which he gives in the description of his Antony:

His voice was propertied
As all the tunéd spheres, and that to friends.
 . . . For his bounty,
There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas
That grew the more by reaping; his delights
Were dolphin-like, they showed his back above
The element they lived in: in his livery
Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were
As plates dropped from his pocket !

Date Due

[illegible]

bd

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

PR 2976 .W55

Wilson, John Dover, 1881-
The Elizabethan Shakespeare /

010101 000



0 1999 0012797 8

TRENT UNIVERSITY

PR2976 .W55

Wilson, John Dover

The Elizabethan Shakespeare.

DATE	ISSUED TO
JUL - 9	Inset Martin C.B.J.

Wilson, J. D.

95628

